



Wither Ecocriticism in the Era of the Hyperobject? A Review of Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature* and *The Ecological Thought*.

In *The Politics of Nature*, Bruno Latour proposes a revitalization of political ecology through the deliberately counter-intuitive claim that “political ecology has nothing to do with nature” (5). To ground this claim, Latour refers to a theory of reality that he calls the Modernist Constitution: an ontology that splits society (humans) and nature (nonhuman entities) into discrete assemblies. Nature is the domain of mechanistic or biological causality, and culture or society is an autonomous domain of linguistic or social constructivism free from nature’s determination. Such a bracketing underwrites the figuration of nature as an Edenic “over there,” that is, nature as existing in a mental and physical location at some distance from modern societies that have “fallen from” nature through the destruction wrought by industrial modernity. An idealized “pristine” nature perpetuates an ontological distinction that compromises the political aims that this ideology of nature serves – namely, a political aim to convince humans of our obligation to preserve and encourage a natural environment as it would have existed with minimal human influence. As Timothy Morton admonishes in *Ecology Without Nature*, “Putting something called nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman” (5) and, again, in *The Ecological Thought*, “the very idea of ‘nature’ □ [...] □ will have to wither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society” (1).

In *Ecology without Nature*, Morton conceptually parallels Latour’s remedy for political ecology, down to the use of the identical rhetorical figure in the title. Although such positions are bound to be misread as giving credence to a conservative attempt to abandon environmental activism, both authors intend to further the aims of political ecology and ecocriticism through a re-oriented view of our relationship to nature and society. For Latour, if no meta-entity called “society” could be posited in order to entirely explain the complex interconnections of social and natural realities, then agency is not a fully possessed property of humans; instead, it is something that emerges as a result of the interplay of human and nonhuman forces. For Morton, the ecocritical conception of nature is inevitably discursive – “an arbitrary rhetorical construct, empty of independent, genuine existence behind or beyond the texts we create about it” – before it is ever actual pine trees, spotted owls, or greenhouse gases (21). He writes frankly, “I’d rather be a zombie than a tree hugger,” meaning that he would prefer to exist as a being in the world with only a causal drive to consume the flesh of other humans than one who loves the environment uncritically (129).

Morton’s unapologetic, witty, and hyperbolic zeal targets a monolithic and reified view of nature that obscures “properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art” (1). In order to outline such a proper form, Morton’s *Ecology without Nature* emerges out of a growing cross-disciplinary movement known as the “nonhuman turn,” which seeks to reinvigorate the studies of culture and nature through our dependence on and relations with nonhuman actors as well as nonhumans’ relations with one another. Where Latour or other actor-network theorists are interested in how scientific knowledge claims about nature are translated from the recorded observations in the laboratory to the halls of parliamentary deliberation, *Ecology without Nature* offers a vital supplementation to nonhuman studies at the level of aesthetics. Morton analyzes how rhetorical figures transport readers to nature and nature to readers within the canons of nature writing without any due consideration of the disjuncture

between semiotics and actual natural entities. For Morton, it is not nature as such that demands rethinking, but the aestheticization of nature as something that exists at a remove from humans. Morton locates a version of the Modernist Constitution within the primary-source texts such as William Wordsworth, Henry David Thoreau, and Percy Bysshe Shelley that inform much critical analysis in green Romantic movements. Morton assesses the understanding of aesthetic distance that obtains in the green Romantic view of nature as a bucolic respite from the horrors of industrialized England: "The aesthetic has [thus] been posited as a nonconceptual realm, a place where our ideas about things drop away" (24). As noted in the quote in my opening paragraph, Morton proposes an analogy between green Romanticism's view of nature and patriarchy wherein the feminine is admired and yet negated through a discourse of passivity. Although Morton devotes little space to contemporary nature writing, this trend is seen in the best-selling novels of Robert Macfarlane and Richard Mabey, among others.

Morton foregrounds the concept of 'ecomimesis' to describe the rhetorical techniques that establish an unmediated or transparent view of nature. Ecomimesis includes a "poetics of ambience": sublime forms that appear as if they have transcended a subjective aesthetic frame in an attempt to appear objective. Whether it is the "strong" ecomimesis of the "here-and-now" in Thoreau's "When I wrote the following pages" that explicitly invoke the author's environment of textuality, or the "weak" version of detailed descriptions of the environment outside the text that evoke a linking between signification and the act of writing, an "atmosphere" of an ambient Romanticized nature is recreated throughout much of nature writing.

In contrast to much ecocritical scholarship on content analysis, Morton offers a refreshing attention to formalism. In Chapter 1 ("The Art of Environmental Language"), Morton locates Derridean *aporias* in the ideological construction of nature while foregrounding six rhetorical figures – "rendering," "medial," "timbral," "Aeolian," "tone," and "re-mark" – that he recontextualizes to nature writing from music, poststructuralism, and media production. Morton considers these six figures in performance and installation art, commercial cinema, and popular music, "multimedia in general, and synesthesia in particular [...] all of which are present to some degree in ecomimesis" (34). Such figures allow us not only a representation or a description of nature, but also a sublime intuition of nonhuman entities that we encounter incompletely in sensation and knowledge. This is not the overwhelming awesomeness of the Burkean sublime, but an aesthetic space in between the sublime and the sentimental that seems to resemble the uncanny. Morton advocates for a particular aesthetic style – an ethical goal as the reader may infer – that challenges any signification of transcendental nature in favor of nature as a defamiliarized, absolute Other. In claiming, "Ecological art is duty bound to hold the slimy in view" (159), the slimy is a metaphor for the excluded remainder of the Romantic conception of nature.

Chapter 2 ("Romanticism and the Environmental Subject") documents how the Romantics' union of morality and beauty is predicated upon a parallel assumption of a pure subjectivity somehow removed from modernity. Morton traces how the rise of environmental art coincides with the emergence of global capitalism where consumerism is not an active state of consuming, but an attitude or an enframing of identity toward an entelechy of consumerism as a state of being. As a reflexive mode of consumption, "one doesn't just eat carrots, one styles oneself as a carrot eater" (111). These connect up with modern attitudes of the environment where "environments were caught in the logic of Romantic consumerism. Wilderness can only exist as a reserve of unexploited capital" (113). Morton takes Hegel's "beautiful soul" as a liminal being – an "unhappy consciousness," in Hegel's words – trapped in between contemplative aesthetic distance and a moral dimension that is reinforced by this presumed distance, while nevertheless yearning to close the gap that takes the form *not* of an acknowledgement of the

reality of nature, but of an Ruskinian aesthetics of wilderness appreciation that in turn feeds an “ecotourist” mentality to nature.

To borrow a phrase from Slavoj Žižek, in Chapter 3 (“Imagining Ecology without Nature”), Morton would heal ecocriticism with the spear that smote it; that is, if art initially presented the problem, then art can best indicate future trajectories. If modernity’s subject-object problem of nature and culture is never resolved but deferred, then Morton’s new techniques of nature writing are those of deconstruction/reconstruction – juxtaposition, collage, montage, “mash up” – where empirical reality is accepted in fragmented forms and recombined in ways that transport the contingency of natural reality without resolving it into a higher unity.

Through the three chapters, Morton is working toward a pragmatic rhetorical situation for ecocriticism where ecocriticism avoids “serving up lashings of guilt and redemption,” and instead subverting “fixating images of the ‘world’ that inhibits humans from grasping their place in an already historical nature” (141). Morton claims that, “ecological criticism must politicize the aesthetic” to purge ourselves of a Romantic view of nature “to be open for the absolutely unknown that is to come” (205). Given this call, it is tempting to see his subsequent work *The Ecological Thought* as a fulfillment of this “to come.” Morton’s appeal is quite similar: modernity is what enabled a global ecological thought, or a generalized concern for our ability to impact nature and how, nevertheless, our figurations of an external nature make this thought impossible; however, Morton absolutely declares in the “preface” that it is a “prequel” to *Ecology without Nature*. Unlike the content of *Ecology without Nature*’s dense array of philosophical and literary references, *The Ecological Thought* is written for a wider audience than ecocritics (Morton nevertheless leaves an exhaustive number of research footnotes for the interested scholars). Morton consequently weaves a patchwork of thinkers and philosophers (Charles Darwin, William Blake, and Buddhism), as well as popular culture references (*Wall*E* and *Blade Runner*).

Morton continues his trend of fashioning new conceptual instruments in order to practice a dark ecology. Chapter 1 (“Think Big”) foregrounds two key concepts: “the mesh” and “strange stranger.” The mesh is a more subtle signifier than web or network; it means the interconnectedness of living and nonliving things, while capturing both holes within a network and the threads of interconnectedness between them, while nevertheless maintaining a sublime dimension: the “strange stranger.” Morton sees a perfect expression of the mesh in Darwin’s theory of evolutionary hodgepodge in the proliferation, randomness, contingency, and useless display that he explores through the allegory of time in Coleridge’s poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. For Darwin, all beings, from humans to flowers, are not independent living things, but evolving compositions of emergent formal processes: “material organization turns out to be sets of formal relationships” (68). He touches upon ecological art, film *noir*, and fractal geometry among other various *techné* of environmental representation. Each *techné* allows Morton to explore the ways in which different aesthetic practices reveal complex sensory intuitions of nature. In Chapter 2 (“Dark Thoughts”), Morton explores a melancholy bond with nature in keeping with the imagery of “darkness” over the utopian or “bright” thinking of the green movement. Dark ecology is an ironic, contemplative, and uncertain attunement to the shadowy world of nature. He poses an allegory through the genre of film noir, where a narrator’s descriptive neutrality gives way to an indictment that is tainted with desire. Nature as a “strange stranger” is thus the limit of the imagination, a sort of uncanniness that haunts any empirical, sensory, aesthetic, or perception or sensation of our connections with nature.

The content and trajectory of the three chapters is impossible to generalize. The book’s non-linear chapters will likely perplex even patient readers. Morton avoids a performative contradiction in that if

he argues that we live in “the mesh,” then his arguments would be ill served by clear starting and ending places. Instead, Morton’s text is a sort of labyrinthine palimpsest designed to aesthetically induce the disorientation of conventional ecological thinking while moving us to a place of the radical “undecidability” of nature. As a meditation, Morton may be forgiven for making poetic claims in passing, such as “when we dwell on something, we inhabit it”; however, some may take issue with claims such as “the ecological thought is also friendly to disability” that require more argumentation than Morton provides. His example of Sphex wasps in this context is engaging but it enjoys only two sentences of description. The reader is left to wonder about the analogy to disability that she should draw from case of a “paralyzed cricket” that the Sphex wasp feeds to its young.

The ecological thought is pervasive: “Ecology has to do with love, loss, despair and compassion. It has to do with depression and psychosis [...] It has to do with reading and writing [...] It has to do with sexuality” (2). Morton’s significance for ecocriticism lies in arguing that there is no safe transcendental remove from which the social or the individual cogito can retreat in order to fully contemplate nature. Morton is no mere advocate of a shift from Romantic piety to postmodern skepticism. Unlike deconstruction’s focus on signification, Morton describes real entities such as global warming that exceed any ability to reduce it to a social or cultural phenomenon. The ecological thought is “a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings – animal, vegetable, or mineral” (7). The ecological thought is necessary to help us think of political activity with the onset of “hyperobjects,” or objects such as plutonium or Styrofoam that will far outlast biological and social life. Another of Morton’s neologisms, hyperobjects are massively human-nonhuman assemblages distributed in temporal and spatial contexts to the extent that any local manifestation cannot reveal their totality. Hyperobjects reinforce the necessity of Morton’s critical project for considering aesthetic and formal qualities that will allow us to intuit such ecological assemblages as real and yet withdrawn entities without sentimentalizing them.

While Morton’s deconstruction of the ideology of nature and attention to formalism is commendable, readers may pause over his political extension of this renewed attention to formal properties of aesthetics. In a tacit recontextualization of Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics as a pre-figurative and radical openness to the human as absolutely Other, Morton argues that a parallel ethical gesture toward nature can serve a sort of nonprescriptive “operating system for politics: it doesn’t tell you what to do, exactly, but it opens your mind so you can think clearly about what to do” (125). Morton all too briefly discusses the question of ethics that was largely begged in *Ecology without Nature*. In both texts, Morton would do well to draw upon those such as Silvia Benso in *The Face of Things* who combine Heidegger and Levinas into a more cogent position on Thing ethics.

Morton’s formal and performative gestures are resolved by an apparently rationalistic understanding of the relationship between political activity and ecology in his claim, “If we see nature correctly, then we will act appropriately” (*Thought* 124). I am in firm agreement with Morton’s warning that in jettisoning the consumerist and aestheticized nature, we must not “join the nonhuman” by collapsing aesthetic distance while nevertheless remaining ensnared by humanist or Romantic assumptions. However, without a rigorous discussion of politics or ethics, these sketches feel impoverished. I could predict possible objections drawn from Hannah Arendt to the effect that aesthetic being is a constitutive form of political activity that is considerably more complex than a relegation to posing a challenge the presumption of the transcendental ego. Even Morton’s enthusiasts may well puzzle over his apparent return to clarity – albeit one that would not be seen as ‘clear’ from a Romantic view of nature.

Along these lines, Morton's call to imagine "ways of being together that don't depend on self-interest" has been invoked by Latour's call that we should extend Kant's categorical imperative to all beings (*Thought* 135). I began and ended this review with Latour to suggest a recurring puzzlement in Morton's two texts that, by all accounts, add such a critical aesthetic nuance to a project for which Latour provided great critical momentum; yet, Latour regrettably enjoys little reference in Morton's scholarship. In placing them together, I hope to imply a fertile site of cross-pollination between the two thinkers as Morton has as formal and aesthetic nuance to offer political ecology as Latour has conceptual instruments to deal with politics and ethics of nonhumans.

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